JOHN BYRNE'S

2112™

DARK HORSE COMICS

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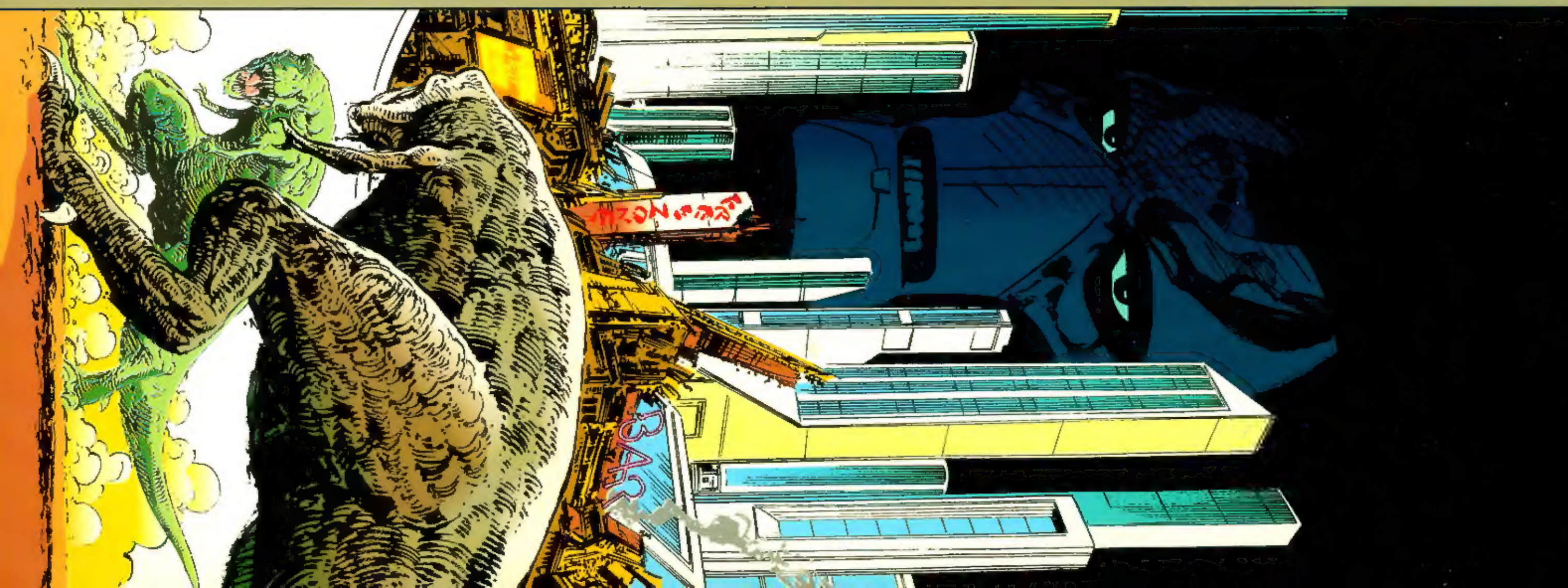

2112

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IF IT MUST HAVE A **BEGINNING**, AND EVERYTHING HAS A BEGINNING...

...THEN START IT HERE. WITH THE **HEAT** AND THE **DUST**.

THE SAND DARK WITH OLD BLOOD.

THEY KNOW EACH OTHER WELL, THESE TWO, THE OLD BULL AND THE YOUNG CHALLENGER. EACH BEARS THE SCARS OF THE OTHER'S TALONS.

THEY CIRCLE. SOME MIGHT SAY THEY **DANCE**, A GRIM DANCE OLDER THAN TIME ITSELF.

AND THEN, WITH A SHRIEK THAT SEEMS TO TEAR THE VERY AIR...

...THE OLD BULL **STRIKES**.

AND THE CROWD GOES *WILD!*

THE MINISAURS ARE SOMETHING NEW. LESS THAN THREE YEARS SINCE THEY WERE FIRST MARKETED.

IT ONLY TOOK A YEAR FOR SOMEONE TO FIND A WAY TO *CORRUPT* THE NEW DISCOVERY.

YEAH! YEAH! KILL THE BASTARD! KILL HIM! KILL HIM!!

IS THIS *GREAT*, BABY?

IS THIS GREAT?!

BUT, EVEN WITH THE ROAR OF CROWD AND COMBATANTS...

...SOME EARS ARE KEEN ENOUGH TO HEAR OTHER SOUNDS.

HEY... SOMEBODY OUTSIDE..?

A *CLUE*, IF EVER THERE WAS ONE.

ALL RIGHT, EVERYBODY FREEZE!

YOU ARE ENGAGED IN THE ILLEGAL EXPLOITATION OF A CONTROLLED SPECIES. PUT YOUR HANDS OVER YOUR HEADS AND NO ONE WILL GET HURT.

SCALE-FACE!

WASTE 'EM!!

MY PLEASURE!

GOOD SHOOTING.

BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

NOW... ANYBODY ELSE WANT TO PLAY HERO?

BLAST HIM!

POP HIM!

HE'S ONLY ONE GUY!

TRUE ENOUGH.

BUT ONE GUY WITH A LOT OF VERY SPECIAL *TRAINING.*

AND A WHOLE *LIFETIME OF EXPERIENCE...*

...IN DEALING WITH TWO-BIT 'SPLOITERS LIKE YOU!

OH, JEEZ! OH, JEEZ!

HE KILLED THEM ALL!

MISS CARTER?

ARE YOU ALLISON CARTER?

ALLISON? HE'S HERE FOR ALLI-SON?

OH, CHRIST, NO!!

'SCUSE ME, MISS CARTER.

YOUR BOYFRIEND SEEMS TO HAVE LOST INTEREST IN YOU ALL OF A SUDDEN.

PARDON ME ONE SECOND WHILE I...

...BAG 'IM!

THERE. THAT SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN THE WIND OUT OF HIS SAILS.

NOW, MISS CARTER... AS I STARTED TO ASK BEFORE...

...ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?

ALL RIGHT?

ALL RIGHT??

ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN ***MIND***??

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE ***DOING*** HERE?

THAT'S MY ***HUSBAND!*** HE'S NOT SOME COMMON CROOK YOU CAN MAN-HANDLE!

MISS CARTER...

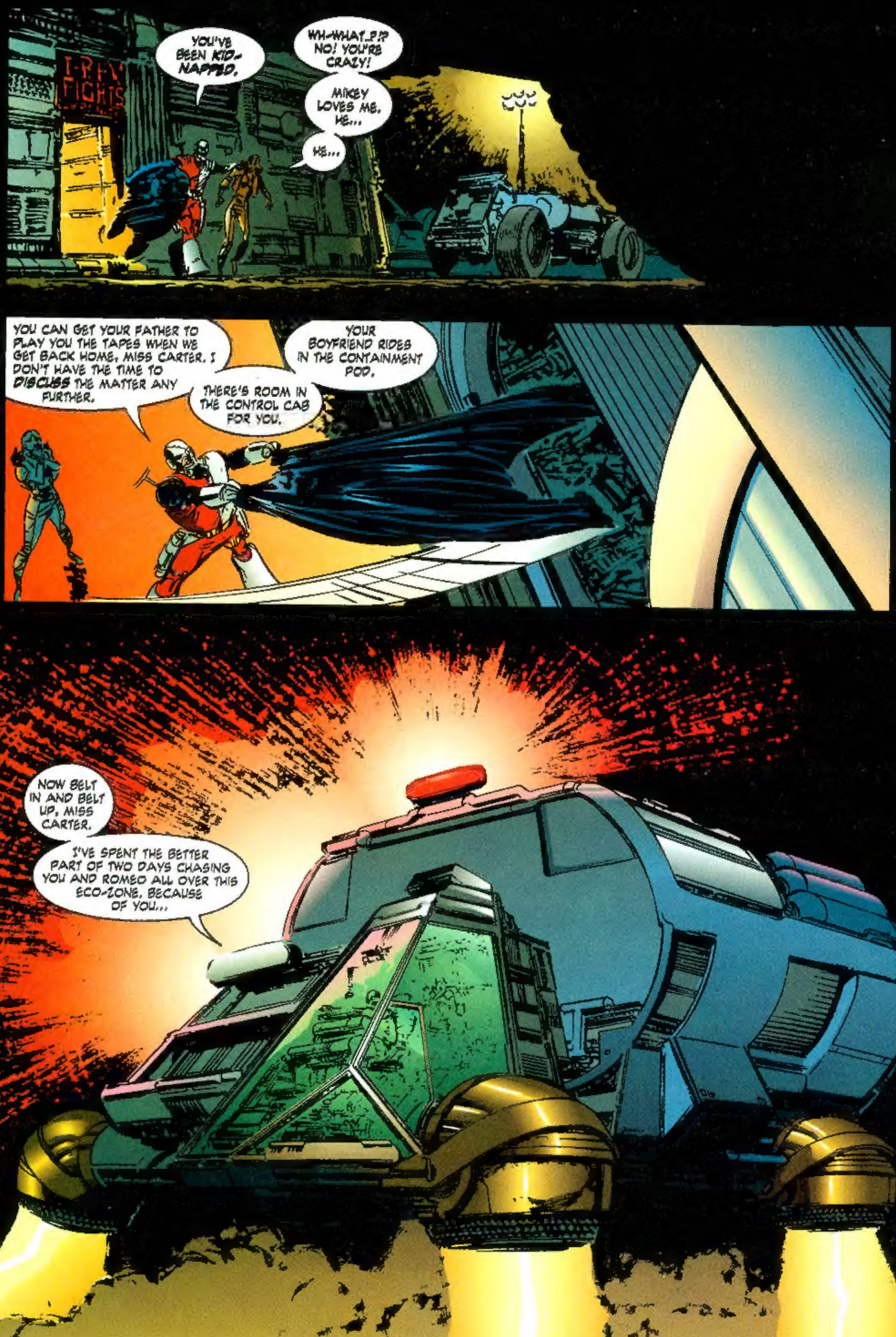
WHEN MY ***FATHER*** HEARS ABOUT THIS..!!

...I HAPPEN TO BE HERE BECAUSE YOUR FATHER ASKED ME TO COME AFTER YOU AND YOUR "HUSBAND."

APPARENTLY YOU DON'T KNOW IT, MISS CARTER, BUT WHILE YOU'VE BEEN ON YOUR "HONEYMOON..."

...YOUR SO-CALLED HUSBAND HAS BEEN CALLING IN ***RANSOM*** DEMANDS TO YOUR FATHER.

YOU HAVEN'T BEEN ***MARRIED***, MISS CARTER.


T-REX FIGHTS
YOU'VE BEEN KID-NAPPED.
WH-WHAT..?!? NO! YOU'RE CRAZY!
MIKEY LOVES ME. HE...
HE...
YOU CAN GET YOUR FATHER TO PLAY YOU THE TAPES WHEN WE GET BACK HOME, MISS CARTER. I DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO DISCUSS THE MATTER ANY FURTHER.
THERE'S ROOM IN THE CONTROL CAB FOR YOU.
YOUR BOYFRIEND RIDES IN THE CONTAINMENT POD.
NOW BELT IN AND BELT UP, MISS CARTER.
I'VE SPENT THE BETTER PART OF TWO DAYS CHASING YOU AND ROMEO ALL OVER THIS ECO-ZONE, BECAUSE OF YOU...

"...I'M GOING TO MISS A VERY IMPORTANT **APPOINTMENT.**"

JUMP AHEAD A FEW HOURS NOW, AND NORTH A FEW THOUSAND MILES.

TO THE **LONG ISLAND** HEADQUARTERS OF **SAFEGUARD, INC.**

AND, INSIDE THE TALLEST OF THE TALL, TALL TOWERS, SOME VERY PROUD PARENTS ARE GATHERED TO WITNESS THE GRADUATION CEREMONIES OF THIS YEAR'S **CADETS.**

LIKE EVERY GRADUATION CEREMONY SINCE THE IDEA WAS FIRST CONCEIVED, THAT MEANS THEY'RE SITTING VERY POLITELY...

...AND LISTENING TO A LOT OF VERY BORING PEOPLE MAKE VERY BORING SPEECHES...

...ABOUT A LOT OF THINGS MOST OF THEM ALREADY KNOW.

...SINCE THE **PRIVATIZATION** OF THE MILITARY AND LAW-ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES IN 2045.

SAFEGUARD, THEN, WAS THE NATURAL OUTGROWTH OF THIS, AS ALL THE FORCES DESIGNED AND CREATED WITH THE PROTECTION OF HUMANITY IN MIND...

...WERE HERE COMBINED INTO ONE SUCCINCT FORCE, ONE HOMOGENEOUS AGENCY WHOSE PURPOSE HAS SLOWLY AND LOGICALLY DEFINED ITSELF OVER THE INTERVENING CENTURY.

TO YOU GRADUATES PASSES THE MANTLE OF RESPONSIBILITY. TO YOU NOW FALLS THE GREAT TASK OF PROTECTING THE PEOPLE AND THE PLANET, NOT ONLY FROM THOSE **OUTSIDE** FORCES WHICH STILL RISE ON OCCASION TO THREATEN GLOBAL STABILITY...

...BUT FROM OUR OWN FOOLISHNESS, OUR OWN CARELESSNESS, FROM THE INSIDIOUS POLICIES OF WASTE AND DESTRUCTION WHICH, NOT SO LONG AGO, ALMOST OVERWHELMED AND CONSUMED ALL LIFE ON EARTH.

AND TODAY IS A VERY SPECIAL DAY INDEED, FOR, IN ADDITION TO COMMEMORATING THE GRADUATION OF THIS, THE **CLASS OF 2112**...

...IT IS ALSO MY GREAT PLEASURE, AS HEAD OF SAFEGUARD, TO ANNOUNCE THE NAMES OF THOSE SIX CADETS WHOSE RECORD HERE AT THE ACADEMY HAS BEEN SO **EXEMPLARY**...

...THEY HAVE BEEN SELECTED TO CONTINUE THEIR TRAINING AS **APPRENTICES** UNDER THE DIRECT TUTELAGE OF OUR SIX CHIEF **FIELD OPERATIVES.**

KLAUS VON KEMP...

MARGUERITE DE FUEGO...

ALEXI GARGARIN...

THOMAS KIRKLAND...

ELIZABETH M'BENGA...

DAVID PU YI.

OH, NOW CALVIN DOESN'T REALLY MEAN ANY HARM, TOMMY. HE'S AS PROUD OF YOU AS I AM.

ARE YOU COMING HOME FOR DINNER THIS EVENING?

NO. A BUNCH OF US ARE GETTING TOGETHER FOR ONE LAST BIG BLOW-OUT BEFORE WE REPORT FOR FIELD DUTY.

AND UNCLE SILAS HAS SENT A CAR TO TAKE ME INTO THE CITY. HE WANTS TO GIVE ME A PEP TALK, I GUESS.

"BUT MAYBE I COULD COME BY TOMORROW NIGHT..."

CRUISING ALTITUDE.

THERE IS A DEBATE OVER THE MARTIAN INDEPENDENCE QUESTION AT UNITED PLANETS HEADQUARTERS, SIR.

DO YOU WISH ME TO TRANSFER IT TO THE BACK SEAT DISPLAY?

NO, THANKS, JEREMIAH.

I... JUST WANT TO SIT QUIETLY AND THINK FOR A WHILE.

AS YOU WISH, SIR.

WE WILL BE ARRIVING IN NEW YORK IN ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY SECONDS.

NEW YORK.

FOR TWO HUNDRED YEARS IT VIED WITH TOKYO FOR THE TITLE OF WORLD'S LARGEST CITY.

APPROACH MODE.

IT WON, SIMPLY BECAUSE IT HAD MORE ROOM TO SPREAD. THE CONURBATION COVERS EVERY SQUARE INCH FROM BOSTON TO PHILADELPHIA, INLAND AS FAR AS PITTSBURGH.

SINCE NINETY PERCENT OF THE REST OF THE COUNTRY HAS BEEN CONVERTED BACK TO PARKLAND AND FARMS, THAT'S NOT AS BIG A PROBLEM AS YOU MIGHT THINK.

THIS IS THE WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF THE *SILAS VAN DAMME CORPORATION.*

NAME A BUSINESS, ANY BUSINESS, AND YOU'RE LIKELY TO FIND SILAS VAN DAMME HOLDS THE MAJORITY OF ITS STOCK.

HE'S THE WORLD'S RICHEST MAN, AND THE BUSIEST.

BEING INVITED TO DROP BY HIS PRIVATE OFFICES IS A GREAT AND RARE PRIVILEGE...

...EVEN FOR A BLOOD RELATIVE.

I HOPE YOU ENJOYED YOUR FLIGHT, SIR.

SMOOTH AS SILK, AS ALWAYS, JEREMIAH.

THANKS.

YOU REMAIN THE MOST COURTEOUS OF HUMANS, MR. THOMAS.

I KNOW OF NO ONE ELSE WHO SAYS "THANK YOU" TO SYNTHETICS.

CYNTHIA!

I THOUGHT UNCLE SILAS TRANS-FERRED YOU TO THE EURO-ZONE.

I HAVE BEEN BACK A LITTLE OVER A YEAR, MR. THOMAS.

WILL YOU COME THIS WAY?

"YOUR UNCLE HAS MUCH TO SAY TO YOU, AND ONLY A LITTLE TIME."

THOMAS!

I'M SO GLAD YOU COULD COME! HOW WAS THE GRADUATION CEREMONY?

OH, ABOUT LIKE YOU'D EXPECT, UNCLE SILAS.

A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO USED TO BE IMPORTANT MAKING SPEECHES ABOUT THINGS THAT HARDLY MATTER ANYMORE.

I'M SORRY YOU COULDN'T MAKE IT, THOUGH. YOU KNOW I LIKE TO SHOW OFF MY FAVORITE UNCLE.

AS I LIKE TO *BE* SHOWN, THOMAS.

BUT I AM A SLAVE OF MY OWN SUCCESS. AS YOU KNOW, I HAVE ONLY A FEW MINUTES TO SPARE YOU NOW.

I'M GLAD OF THAT, UNCLE.

WHOA! HEY, GERTIE! HOW YA DOIN', GIRL?

IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE SHE WAS THE FIRST MINI-SAUR YOU EVER CREATED, UNCLE SILAS. I NEVER GET OVER HOW ***REAL*** SHE IS.

BUT, THEN, SHE *IS* REAL, FOR ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES, THOMAS. SHE MAY HAVE SPRUNG FROM A SYNTHETICS FACTORY, NOT HER MOTHER'S EGG...

...BUT SHE BREATHES, EATS, EVEN ***THINKS*** IN HER OWN LIMITED WAY, JUST AS WOULD HER FULL-SIZED ANCESTORS.

AND I SHOULD NOT HAVE EXPECTED YOU TO BE AT ALL SURPRISED BY THE REALISM OF MY SYNTHETICS. AREN'T YOU THE SAME THOMAS WHO HAD THE MOST TERRIFIC *CRUSH* ON MY LITTLE CYNTHIA HERE...

IT WAS MY PLEASURE TO BE OF SERVICE TO MR. THOMAS. I MAY GO SO FAR AS TO SAY HE HAS A *FINE* TECHNIQUE FOR...

...AT LEAST UNTIL YOU GOT OVER YOUR SHYNESS AROUND *HUMAN* FEMALES.

ER... YEAH. WELL, THAT'S ALL FINE AND GOOD...

...BUT YOU DIDN'T INVITE ME HERE JUST TO TALK ABOUT MY... CHILDHOOD FIXATIONS, D'D YOU, UNCLE?

INDEED, I DID NOT, THOMAS.

THAT WILL BE ALL, CYNTHIA.

COME OVER TO THE WINDOW, THOMAS.

I WANT YOU TO TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE.

I SEE... NEW YORK, UNCLE SILAS. THE GREATEST CITY IN THE WORLD.

S THAT ALL?

YOU DISAPPOINT ME, NEPHEW.

SHALL I TELL YOU WHAT I SEE?

I SEE *ORDER*, THOMAS. ORDER BUILT OUT OF CHAOS.

"THIS PLANET OF OURS WAS *BORN* OUT OF CHAOS, THOMAS.

"BORN FROM A CLOUD OF SWIRLING GAS AND DUST, SPINNING ABOUT A SEETHING YOUNG STAR.

"IN ALMOST NO TIME, THAT CHAOS GAVE BIRTH TO GREATER CHAOS.

"TO THE TURBULENT HEARTS OF CREATURES WHO WOULD ONE DAY CALL THEMSELVES 'HUMAN.'

"AND IN LESS THAN THE BLINKING OF AN EYE, AS A PLANET MEASURES TIME...

"...THOSE HUMANS SCALED THE MORAL AND INTELLECTUAL HIGH GROUND.

"THEY BEGAN TO THINK THEMSELVES *CIVILIZED*."

BUT THEY ARE **WRONG**, THOMAS.

CIVILIZATION IS AN *ILLUSION*. I HAVE SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE CREATING A FINANCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL *EMPIRE* WITH WHICH I CAN *SHAPE* THE DESTINY OF MAN.

YOUR CALL TO GENEVA IS WAITING, SIR...

AH, YES. I WILL BE RIGHT THERE, CYNTHIA. TELL THEM TO WAIT.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING TO YOU, THOMAS?

EVEN I HAVE BEEN *DENIED* THE ABSOLUTE MASTERY ESSENTIAL TO THE CREATION OF PERFECT WORLD HARMONY.

CHAOS IS A FUNDAMENTAL FORCE IN THE FABRIC OF THE UNIVERSE, THOMAS, AS BASIC AS GRAVITY, AS TIME AND SPACE ITSELF. WE CANNOT CREATE A PERFECT WORLD, A TRULY PERFECT WORLD, UNTIL THE LAST VESTIGE OF THIS CHAOTIC FORCE HAS BEEN *PURGED*.

"THAT TIME IS *COMING*, THOMAS.

"AND THOSE FOUND *WANTING* WILL BE *SWEPT AWAY*."

ENTERING GRAVITY NET.

MAIN CONTROL, DO YOU MONITOR US?

CONFIRMED.

CONTINUE APPROACH ALONG SIGNAL VECTOR NINE ZERO ONE.

SET AUTOMATICS FOR STANDARD DOCKING.

STANDARD DOCKING ACKNOWLEDGED.

EVERYTHING SECURE?

OH, YES. EVERYTHING IS *QUITE* SECURE.

MAIN CONTROL OUT.

THEY SUSPECT NOTHING?

OF COURSE NOT.

THE PLAN IS *FOOL PROOF*.

'WE HAVE CONTROLLED *APOLLYON* FOR SIXTEEN DAYS...

'AND NOT ONE OF OUR 'JAILERS' HAS BEEN MADE IN THE LEAST PART SUSPICIOUS...'

LOCK ON DOCKING RAMP.

ALL SYSTEMS GO.

STAND BY FOR STANDARD DOCKING.

SWITCH LANDING GEAR TO GROUND MODE. STAND BY TO CONVERT TO STATION GRAVITY.

CONVERSION COMPLETE. ALL LIGHTS GREEN.

MAN, I'M GONNA BE GLAD WHEN THIS ONE'S IN THE BAG! I'VE DONE THIS RUN MAYBE FIFTY TIMES...

...BUT I'VE NEVER HAD TO SHIP SUCH A MISERABLE BASTARD!

EXTERIOR DOCK LIGHTS COMING ON. SENSORS SHOW ATMOSPHERE NOW AT POINT NINER.

OKAY. STAND BY TO...

HEY... DID YOU SEE SOMETHING..?

WHAT THE..?!?

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA!!

I'VE WANTED TO DO THIS SINCE YOU BROUGHT ME UP HERE!

I JUST WISH I COULD HAVE MADE IT LAST LONGER!

RAVAK! YOU FOOL! SATHANAS WANTED THEM ALIVE!

YOU'RE WASTING YOUR BREATH, DAVIS, YOU KNOW WILSON CAN ONLY THINK WITH HIS FISTS.

SURE, SURE.

BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE MY LIFE ANY EASIER. I'M THE ONE WHO HAS TO TELL SATHANAS.

"SATHANAS"?

WHAT THE HELL KIND OF NAME IS THAT?

WHO'S SATH-ANAS?

"...AND MAYBE YOU'LL GET THROUGH YOUR INITIATION ALIVE!"

BRING HIM HERE.

LET ME HAVE A LOOK AT HIM.

YOU'LL FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH.

NOW, KEEP YOUR YAP SHUT...

YES, YOU'LL DO.

WELCOME, NEWCOMER.

WELCOME TO THE END OF YOUR OLD LIFE...

...AND THE BEGINNING OF AN EXISTENCE YOU HAVE NEVER DARED DREAM.

ARE YOU READY TO COMMIT YOURSELF TO THE RULE OF SATHANAS?

SATHANAS!

SATHANAS!

SUBMIT TO THE RULE OF SATHANAS!

HE WILL LEAD US INTO THE NEW AGE!

THE AGE OF THE HALFLINGS!

DO YOU UNDERSTAND, NEWCOMER?

YOUR EXISTENCE IS NO MERE ACCIDENT.

YOU ARE PART OF A **MASTER PLAN**, A PLAN I HAVE BEEN SENT TO BRING TO GLORIOUS FRUITION!

SUBMIT TO MY RULE, NEWCOMER.

THE RULE OF SATHANAS!

THE RULE OF **POWER!**

POWER?

WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?

YOU TALK AWFUL BIG, BUT YOU DON'T SEEM LIKE SO MUCH TO ME.

I BEEN RUNNIN' MY OWN LIFE, MAKIN' MY OWN CHOICES FOR TWENTY YEARS.

I AIN'T GONNA BOW DOWN TO NO TWO-BIT DICTATOR I NEVER EVEN *HEARD* OF.

I DO NOT SPEAK *LIGHTLY* OF POWER, NEWCOMER.

AND ON APOLLYON THERE ARE NO *SECOND CHANCES.*

WRONG ANSWER.

"NOW LEARN...

"...THE *LAST* LESSON...

"...OF YOUR *LIFE.*"

REMOVE THE BODY.

PREPARE FOR THE INITIATION OF *PHASE TWO.*

AT LAST! I WAS BEGINNING TO THINK WE WERE NEVER GOING TO MOVE!

WHY SO IMPATIENT, GIRL?

THE LONGER WE PUT OFF LEAVING THIS ROCK...

...THE BETTER WE CAN ALL GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER.

YOUR... HAND...

JABUB!

YOU MISERABLE GODDAMN BITCH!

I'LL KILL YOU FOR THAT!

HEY! FIGHT!

BETTER GET CLEAR.

THAT BEAMER HASN'T LEARNED FULL CONTROL OF HIS BLASTS...

FULL CONTROL?

I DON'T NEED FULL CONTROL...

...TO BLOW THIS BITCH'S ASS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS ROCK!

FOOL!

YOU ARE ***CARELESS!*** YOU SQUANDER YOUR POWER ON ***SHOW*** INSTEAD OF LEARNING ***SKILL!***

THAT LITTLE DISPLAY WILL COST YOU FIVE YEARS OF YOUR LIFE.

CAN YOU FEEL THEM DRAINING AWAY? CAN YOU FEEL THE TOUCH OF MY POWER?

AHHH!

IS THERE ANYONE ELSE WHO WISHES TO DEMONSTRATE HIS *INDIVIDUALITY?*

WE ARE MERE HOURS FROM THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE GREATEST ENTERPRISE IN HUMAN HISTORY.

ARE YOU ALL TOO *STUPID* TO COMPREHEND THAT SINGLE FACT? MUST I WASTE TIME AND ENERGY DEALING WITH YOU AS I WOULD *CHILDREN??*

NO, SATHANAS, WE ARE ALL WITH YOU. WE ARE ALL *READY.*

SEE TO IT THAT YOU ARE. MY PLAN IS AS DELICATE AS THE FINEST *CLOCKWORK.*

I SHALL NOT BROOK THE LEAST *DEVIANCE* FROM MY COMMAND.

AND THERE SHALL BE NONE, SATHANAS. GIVE THE WORD. WE ALL STAND READY *TO STRIKE.*

GOOD. GO TO YOUR POSTS.

IN EXACTLY SEVENTY FIVE MINUTES WE SHALL LAUNCH THE FIRST SORTIE.

FROM THAT MOMENT, NOTHING ON EARTH WILL EVER BE THE SAME.

NONE OF THIS WAS KNOWN ON EARTH, OF COURSE.

IT WOULD BE PIECED TOGETHER *AFTERWARD*, FROM THE *DEBRIS* OF THE NEXT DAYS.

FOR THE PRESENT, OUR HAPPY GRADS HAVE ONLY ONE THING ON THEIR MINDS.

WELL, MAYBE TWO...

BRAVO, KLAUS!

BRAVO, ELIZABETH!

STILL YOU ARE THE BEST G-DANCERS IN THE ACADEMY!

WOW, ALEX!!

YOU SAID THEY WERE HOT, BUT I HAD NO IDEA!

C'MON, BETHANY! JOIN THE PARTY!

THOMAS! MAGGIE! YOU ARE *LEAVING* US SO SOON?

YEAH, WELL...

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY, ALEX, AND WE WANTED TO TURN IN EARLY.

I MEAN, GET TO BED EARLY.

I MEAN...

I THINK EVERYBODY KNOWS WHAT YOU MEAN, TOMMY.

THOMAS KIRKLAND, I PRESUME?

SAY... HAVEN'T CAUGHT YOU KIDS AT A BAD MOMENT, HAVE I?

IF YOU LIKE I COULD COME BACK IN... WHAT? FIFTEEN, TWENTY MINUTES?

ER... AH... NO. THAT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY.

I... HAVE TO GO GET READY FOR MY FIRST SORTIE WITH AGENT GREEN, ANYWAY...

MAGS...

SORRY, TOMMY.

I'LL... SEE YOU SOME OTHER NIGHT, OKAY?

BUT...

BUT...

WELL, MISTER, YOU JUST ABOUT BEAT EVERYTHING!

DID YOU TAKE SPECIAL TRAINING IN ROTTEN TIMING, OR DOES IT JUST COME NATURALLY?

IT'S A GET, KID.

NOW GRAB YOUR HOT SUIT.

"WE'VE GOT A BIG JOB TO DO."

WHA..?

THAT'S YOUR TRANSPORT? I HEARD YOU DIDN'T FLY THE USUAL RIG, BUT...

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING, KID. IT'S TAKEN TEN YEARS TO GET HER INTO HER PRESENT CONFIGURATION...

...AND THERE'S NO SHIP IN ALL OF SAFEGUARD THAT CAN TOUCH HER.

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

I'VE SEEN TARGET SHIPS THAT LOOKED BETTER THAN THIS--***AFTER*** BOMBARDMENT!

NICE TALK.

LOOK, I KNOW WE'RE GETTING OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT HERE, KIRKLAND, BUT IF YOU'RE GOING TO APPRENTICE UNDER ME, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO LEARN A FEW GROUND RULES.

LIKE FOR ONE...

...I MAY NOT CUT THE MUSTARD IN AN OFFICIAL REVIEW, AND MY SHIP MAY LOOK LIKE A PLUMBER'S NIGHTMARE, BUT WE GET THE JOB DONE.

AND YOU'D DO WELL TO LEARN WHAT SOMETHING IS CAPABLE OF, BEFORE YOU PASS JUDGMENT.

NOW HANG ON, WE HAVE TO BE IN BRAZIL BEFORE DAWN.

BRAZIL? BUT THAT'S OVER ***THREE HOURS*** AWAY.

NOT FOR THIS CRATE.

BRAZIL, SOUTH AMERICAN ECO-ZONE.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO THESE SLOPES WERE VERDANT RAIN FOREST, UNTIL THE MARCH OF POPULATION DECIDED THE LAND COULD BE PUT TO BETTER USE.

THE TREES WENT SO THE FIELDS COULD GROW. BUT, WITHOUT THE TREES, THE DELICATE ECOLOGY FAILED.

TODAY, WHERE THERE USED TO BE TREES, WHERE THERE USED TO BE FIELDS, THERE'S A GIANT OXYGEN PROCESSOR, SUCKING UP DEEP-GROUND WATER...

...SMASHING IT INTO ITS COMPONENT ELEMENTS.

COSTING BILLIONS EACH YEAR TO DO WHAT MOTHER NATURE USED TO DO FOR *FREE*.

AND THAT GENERATOR IS OF SPECIAL INTEREST TON GHT TO SOME PEOPLE YOU'VE SEEN BEFORE...

TAKE IT EASY!

I DON'T WANT THIS THING GOING OFF WHILE WE'RE WITH-IN A HUNDRED MILES!

NO SWEAT.

WITHOUT THE *PRIMER*, IT'S HARMLESS AS...

CUT THE BLAB!

WE'RE ON A TIGHT SCHEDULE...

HUH?

HOLY SHIT!!

SCALE-FACES!

HOW'D THEY KNOW??

HOW'D THEY KNOW??

NO BIG DEAL, FRIEND.

I JUST PAY ATTENTION.

LOTS OF THINGS TO BE HEARD...

...IF YOU KEEP YOUR EAR TO THE RIGHT DOORS.

AND WHILE ALL THIS IS HAPPENING...

THERE'S A MAJOR EFFORT BEING EXERTED TO KEEP FROM PUKING ALL OVER THE CONTROL CAB.

IT REALLY DOES A BIG NUMBER ON YOUR G.I. TRACT.

THAT'S ONE OF THE REASONS TELEPORTATION HAS NEVER GONE OVER BIG WITH THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

LUCKILY SAFEGUARD AGENTS, EVEN CADETS, ARE TRAINED TO STAY ALERT EVEN UNDER THE WORST CONDITIONS.

HOLY...! RED!

LOOK OUT!!

CHRIST! WHERE THE HELL DID YOU POP UP FROM..??

YOU SHOULD KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT ONE, SCALE-FACE.

YOU PUT MOST OF US THERE!

UNFH!!

CAUGHT YOU OFF GUARD.

I THOUGHT YOU WERE TRAINED NEVER TO PRE-JUDGE AN OPPONENT.

ALL RIGHT...

SO IT'S A CLICHÉ, BUT I DIDN'T EXPECT YOU TO BE SO B G AND SO FAST.

SO SUE ME.

ANY HUMAN WOULD HAVE BEEN *VAPORIZED* IN THE FIRST TWO SECONDS.

THE BLAST OF THE BOOT JETS ONLY SLOWS THE BIG BRAWLER DOWN FOR A FEW HEARTBEATS.

STILL, THAT'S TIME ENOUGH TO TRY AN ATTACK FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE.

RED! STAY DOWN! I'M GONNA PULSE 'M!

BUT THE HALFLING MONSTER HAS OTHER IDEAS.

NO! HE'S GRABBED HIM!

WAVING HIM AROUND LIKE A RAG DOLL!

BUT I'M TRAINED FOR THIS!

GOT TO STAY CALM...

GOT TO TIME MY SHOT...

"...PERFECTLY!"

GRA-AHH-H!!

THE PULSE GUN DOES ITS JOB. THE HALFLING STAGGERS, STARTS TO TOPPLE.

ONCE HE'S OFF BALANCE IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO FINISH THE JOB.

NICE WORK, KID.

BUT KEEP THAT CANNON HANDY.

THIS GOON IS ONE OF SATHANAS'S NUMBER ONE ENFORCERS.

WE'VE GOT TO FIND OUT HOW MUCH HE KNOWS ABOUT SATHANAS'S PLANS...

...AND WE DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO BE **GENTLE** ABOUT IT!

THERE'S A JUICY, WET **SQUISH** AS THE PIKE PIERCES THE HALFLING'S SMOLDERING WOUND.

NOT AT ALL THE SOUND YOU'D EXPECT FROM SOMETHING THAT LOOKS LIKE IT'S MADE OF SOLID ROCK.

A NASTY REMINDER THAT, FOR ALL THEIR OUTWARD APPEARANCES, THE HALFLINGS REALLY ARE HUMAN BEINGS.

ALL RIGHT, EASY OR HARD?

THE NEXT TARGET. WHERE?

WHEN?

GO TO HELL...

HARD.

THE STAINLESS STEEL PIKE STARTS WORKING BACK AND FORTH IN THE RAW, RED WOUND.

PRETTY SOON THE HALFLING STARTS SCREAMING.

NOT LONG AFTER THAT HE STARTS TALKING.

I DON'T **BELIEVE** THIS!!

TANNEN, ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR GODDAMN MIND?!?

TANNEN.

A LONG TIME SINCE THAT NAME'S BEEN SPOKEN ALOUD, AROUND THIS OFFICE ANYWAY.

DAVID AUGUST TANNEN. BETTER KNOWN AS FIELD OPERATIVE AGENT RED.

BUT FOR HOW MUCH LONGER?

SINCE WHEN DOES SAFEGUARD HAVE A POLICY OF TORTURING PRISONERS?

SINCE WHEN DO WE DENY MEDICAL AID AND COMFORT TO INJURED CAPTIVES?

SINCE WHEN DID YOU BECOME A ONE-MAN ARMAGEDDON, TANNEN?

THE HALFLING WAS RIGHT OUT OF SATHANAS'S CORE GROUP. YOU'VE SEEN HIS PROFILE. THERE COULD HAVE BEEN VITAL INFORMATION...

BUT THERE ***WASN'T!***

YOU GOT ***NOTHING*** OUT OF HIM.

ALL YOU'VE DONE IS STIR UP A HORNETS' NEST OVER SOMETHING THAT WAS PROBABLY AN ISOLATED INCIDENT. APOLLYON IS SECURE. THIS ***MASSIVE INVASION FORCE*** YOU KEEP WARNING ABOUT IS ***NONEXISTENT!***

AND JUST HOW DID YOU FIND THAT OUT?

CHECK THE AUTOMATIC MONITORS ON THE ASTEROID? SATHANAS HAS THEM BEAT. I'VE TOLD YOU THAT A HUNDRED TIMES.

THAT WAS THE BEGINNING OF HIS WHOLE PLAN. WE NO LONGER CONTROL APOLLYON.

HE DOES.

AND AS LONG AS WE KEEP SHIPPING HALFLINGS UP THERE, WE'RE JUST ADDING TO HIS FORCES.

SO YOU KEEP SAYING.

BUT SO FAR-- EXCEPTING THIS SINGLE ISOLATED INCIDENT--ALL THE HALFLING TROUBLE WE'VE HAD ON EARTH HAS BEEN CAUSED BY THE OCCURRENCE OF NEW SPORTS IN THE UNCONTROLLED POPULACE.

AND YOU THINK THAT'S GOING TO ***STOP?***

IT'S BEEN A HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS SINCE THE ***TRIGGER GENE*** WAS ISOLATED.

OVER A HUNDRED SINCE THE INCIDENT THAT LET IT LOOSE INTO THE 'UNCONTROLLED POPULACE.'

IN THAT TIME, MORE THAN A CENTURY, WHAT HAVE WE BEEN ABLE TO DO ABOUT IT?

NOTHING. THAT'S WHAT! WE JUST ***GRAB*** THE NEW HALFLINGS AS THEY APPEAR...

...AND PACK 'EM OFF TO APOLLYON.

THAT'S NOT A SOLUTION. IT NEVER WAS.

BUT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SEE THAT UNTIL SATHANAS AND A HORDE OF HIS MOST BLOODTHIRSTY HALFLINGS COME SCREAMING OUT OF THE SKY AND SHOVE THIS GODDAMN TOWER UP YOUR ASS!

ARE YOU... SURE THAT WAS THE BEST WAY TO HANDLE THIS SITUATION, COMMANDER?

I KNOW... TANNEN IS A REBEL, BUT HE'S ALWAYS GOT THE JOB DONE.

SPARE ME THE FAIRY TALES, CADET.

BY ***ACCOMPANYING*** TANNEN ON HIS RAMPAGE, BY FAILING TO REPORT HIS TRANSGRESSIONS ***AS THEY WERE HAPPENING***, YOU HAVE PLACED YOURSELF IN VIOLATION OF THE VERY CODES AND ORDERS YOU'VE SWORN TO UPHOLD.

CONSIDER YOURSELF ON ***SUSPENSION*** UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE!

AND THAT'S WHAT LOOKED LIKE THE END OF MAYBE THE SHORTEST CAREER IN SAFEGUARD HISTORY.

BUT, IN FACT, THE STORY WAS BARELY MORE THAN HALF OVER.

THREE DAYS LATER, IN ONE OF THE HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY-YEAR-OLD HISTORIC DISTRICTS IN THE OLD BOROUGH OF QUEENS...

IS TOMMY HOME?

220

WE HEARD ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED.

WE WANT TO SEE HIM.

OH, YEAH?

I THOUGHT YOU GUYS WERE FORBIDDEN TO COMMUN CATE WITH ANYONE ON FULL SUSPENSION.

WE ARE, AND THAT'S WHY YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL ANYONE THAT WE'RE HERE...

...RIGHT, CALVIN?

NOW, WHERE IS TOMMY?

OUT BACK.

"HE'S BEEN LYIN' BY THE POOL AND LICKIN' HIS WOUNDS SINCE HE CAME HOME FROM THE ACADEMY."

TOM...

MAGS! YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED...

WE KNOW. YOUR BROTHER HAS ALREADY TAKEN GREAT DELIGHT IN TELLING US THE SAME THING.

TOMMY... WHY DIDN'T YOU TRY TO GET IN TOUCH WITH ANY OF US?

I'VE BEEN... BUSY, MAGS, AND, WITH WHAT I WAS DOING...

...I DIDN'T WANT TO RISK GETTING THE REST OF YOU IN TROUBLE.

THAT SOUNDS OMINOUS.

WHAT WERE YOU UP TO?

I'VE BEEN USING OUR HOME COMPUTER LINK TO TAP INTO SAFEGUARD.

YOU KNOW I COULD ALWAYS CRACK ANY FILE.

WELL, I ACCESSED THE DATA ON APOLLYON AND THIS "TRIGGER GENE" AGENT RED MENTIONED, AND... MAGGIE, I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE WHAT I FOUND.

IT'S A HUGE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE, MAGS, AND IT GOES BACK MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS!

I GREW UP THINKING SAFEGUARD WAS THE FINEST ORGANIZATION IN THE WORLD. I DREAMED ALL MY LIFE OF BEING AN AGENT. NOW I AM ONE, I FIND THE WHOLE ORGANIZATION IS BUILT AROUND A GIGANTIC *LIE*.

TOMMY...

YOU'RE UNDERSTANDABLY UPSET ABOUT ALL THIS...

...BUT YOU CAN'T HONESTLY EXPECT US TO BELIEVE AN ORGANIZATION LIKE SAFEGUARD COULD HAVE HAD DIRTY HANDS FOR ALL THESE YEARS WITHOUT ANYONE FINDING OUT?

SHE'S RIGHT, TOMMY! THE ROT WOULD HAVE TO GO SO DEEP...

EH?

IT GOES DEEP, KID.

AND IT GOES *WIDE*.

AND IT'S BEEN THERE SINCE 1963. AT *LEAST* SINCE 1963.

AGENT RED!!

OMIGOSH! IT'S HIM! IT'S REALLY HIM!

WHAT'S HE DOIN' HERE??

HE'S GONNA GET TOMMY IN MORE TROUBLE, I BET!

I GOTTA TELL MOM!

SHE'S DOIN' HER FEELIES.

SHE'S TOLD ME NEVER TO INTERRUPT WHEN THE PROGRAM'S RUNNIN'...

BUT THIS IS IMPORTANT!

MOM!

MOM!

MOM, YOU GOTTA COME!

NOW!

H-UHH. ?

MOM!

SNAP OUT OF IT!!

MOM! COME ON! TOMMY'S IN TROUBLE! YOU GOT TO DO SOMETHING!

WHAT? TOMMY..?

CALVIN... YOU... BROKE THE CHANNEL CONNECTION...

SNAP OUT OF IT, MOM! YOU CAN PICK UP ON THE DELAYED BROADCAST LATER, IF YOU WANT TO.

THAT AGENT GUY WHO GOT TOMMY IN TROUBLE.

HE'S HERE!

HERE..?

AGENT RED..?

HERE?

OH, MY GOD!

HASN'T HE DONE ENOUGH TO RUIN TOMMY'S LIFE?

OUTSIDE, THE CONVERSATION HAS JUST REACHED PRETTY MUCH THAT SAME QUESTION.

MAGGIE... DON'T...

YOU KEEP OUT OF THIS, TOMMY.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF BULLSHIT THIS COWBOY HAS BEEN FILLING YOUR HEAD WITH...

...BUT IT STOPS RIGHT HERE.

IT'S NOT BULLSHIT, KID.

BELIEVE ME, THIS WHOLE PLANET IS SI~ TING ON TOP OF A TIME BOMB--

--AND THE FUSE HAS JUST ABOUT RUN OUT.

THAT'S WHAT UNCLE SILAS SAID. I'M NOT SURE ***HOW***, BUT HE KNOWS ABOUT ALL THIS, TOO. HE KNOWS ABOUT THE TRIGGER GENE AND THE OLD BREEDER PROJECT, AND THE ***NEXT MEN***...

WELL! YOU ***HAVE*** DONE YOUR HOMEWORK, KID. I'M PROUD OF YOU.

TOMMY, DON'T!

CAN'T YOU SEE HOW MUCH WORSE YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE THIS BY LIS~ TENING TO HIM?

OKAY, I CAN SEE YOU'RE GONNA BE A HARD SELL, KID...

...AND WITH THE HIGH OPINION YOU HAVE OF ME, MAYBE THIS WILL JUST SEEM LIKE SOME KIND OF GRANDSTAND~ ING, AND WON'T CHANGE YOUR MIND.

BUT THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I WAS JUST LIKE YOU, WHEN I DIDN'T BELIEVE ANY OF WHAT TOM HERE HAS JUST FOUND OUT.

THAT WAS BEFORE I HAD MY FIRST RUN~ IN WITH SATHANAS AND HIS BUNCH.

OH, CHRIST! *CHOKE*

TANNEN...

WHAT ?

LIKE I SAID, KID, A SOUVENIR OF MY FIRST EN~ COUNTER WITH SATHANAS.

I WAS ABOUT YOUR AGE. HE DECIDED HE DIDN'T LIKE MY FACE. SO HE ***FIXED*** IT FOR ME. AND HE TOOK THREE DAYS DOING IT.

IT'S A SHOCKER, THAT FACE. SO MUCH SO, NO ONE NOTICES THE CHANGE IN THE VOICE.

NO ONE GUESSES HOW MUCH OF THE MAN CALLED TANNEN IS MANUFACTURED BY THAT SUIT.

ENOUGH!

WHAT IN HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING HERE?

I'VE HEARD ALL ABOUT YOU.

YOU AND YOUR STUPID MACHO GAMES. WITH THE RECONSTRUCTIVE TECHNIQUES AVAILABLE TODAY, YOU COULD HAVE HAD YOUR FACE REBUILT LIKE NOTHING HAD EVER HAPPENED.

BUT THAT WOULDN'T FIT WITH YOUR *IMAGE*, WOULD IT?

YOU'RE RIGHT.

I *COULD* HAVE HAD MY FACE PUT BACK TOGETHER.

BUT I HAVE MY OWN REASONS FOR CHOOSING TO LEAVE IT THE WAY IT IS,

NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH IS TO SERVE AS A CONSTANT REMINDER NEVER TO UNDERESTIMATE SATHANAS AGAIN.

OH, FOR GOD'S SAKE! HOW MUCH OF THIS DO WE HAVE TO LISTEN TO??

YOU'VE RUINED MY SON'S CAREER! DESTROYED EVERYTHING HIS FATHER AND I EVER DREAMED OF FOR HIM! NOW WE HAVE TO STAND HERE AND LISTEN TO YOU TRYING TO JUSTIFY YOUR INSANITY??

MOM...

WAIT, LIKE I WAS TRYING TO TELL THE OTHERS BEFORE AGENT RED ARRIVED..

...IT'S ALL TRUE. EVERYTHING HE SAYS. ABOUT THE HALFLINGS, ABOUT APOLLYON,

EARTH IS IN DANGER,

NOT JUST EARTH. THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE.

ALL BECAUSE OF A STUPID MISTAKE THAT HAPPENED IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY,

THAT MISTAKE HAS HAUNTED THE LIVES OF EVERY MAN AND WOMAN EVER SINCE. BUT IF WE ACT NOW, IF WE DO WHAT AGENT RED WANTS...

...THERE'S A CHANCE--A SLIM CHANCE--ALL THE MADNESS CAN BE ENDED AT LAST.

I CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE REALLY DOING THIS!

IF THE AGENTS WE WERE ASSIGNED TO APPRENTICE WITH SHOULD EVER FIND OUT...

IT'S WAY TOO LATE TO BE WORRYING ABOUT THAT, ALEX.

ABOUT A HUNDRED YEARS TOO LATE.

SEE, THIS ALL STARTED WITH A SECRET GOVERNMENT PROJECT TO "IMPROVE" THE BASIC HUMAN BEING.

THERE WERE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS IN THOSE DAYS, NOT ECONOMIC ZONES, AND THE PROJECT WAS BASED IN THE OLD UNITED STATES.

AND... IF WHAT YOU SAY IS TRUE, THERE WERE NO HALFLINGS, NO SUPER-POWERED BEINGS AT ALL, BEFORE THESE SO-CALLED "NEXT MEN" ESCAPED FROM THAT PROJECT?

THAT'S RIGHT, K.D.

BUT THE LESSON WILL HAVE TO WAIT FOR A WHILE, NOW.

WE'VE REACHED OUR DESTINATION.

THE ANTARCTIC *OZONE GENERATOR!*

TANNEN, YOU'RE APPROACHING TOO FAST! WE MUST NOT GET WITHIN THE GENERATOR'S MAGNETIC FIELDS!

RELAX. I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.

WE CAN FUNCTION SAFELY WITHIN THE FIELD EFFECT FOR UPWARDS OF NINETY MINUTES.

BUT I'M GOING TO LAND BEFORE SATHANAS AND HIS TROOPS HAVE TIME TO SPOT US.

THIS WHOLE MISSION DEPENDS ON SURPRISE.

"AND THAT MEANS WE MAKE THE REST OF THE TRIP ON FOOT."

IT'S SO COLD!

EVEN THROUGH MY UNIFORM I CAN FEEL THE CHILL!

IT'S WINTER DOWN HERE, REMEMBER.

THE TEMPERATURE CAN HIT AS LOW AS MINUS FIFTY-FOUR CENTIGRADE.

AND THAT'S WITHOUT FACTORING IN THE WIND.

THEN WHY DO WE MOVE SO SLOWLY? YOU SAY WE NEED THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE ON OUR SIDE. SURELY A SWIFT, SURGICAL STRIKE WOULD BE TO OUR BENEFIT?

IT WOULD.

IF WE COULD BE SURE THE HALFLINGS WERE COLLECTED IN A CENTRAL LOCATION.

BUT SATHANAS ISN'T STUPID. HE'LL HAVE HIS PEOPLE SCATTERED ALL 'ROUND THE STATION.

THEN THE BEST THING WOULD BE FOR ONE OF US TO MAKE A QUICK TACTICAL SORTIE.

FIND OUT WHERE THE MAIN CONCENTRATION IS.

AND I VOLUNTEER!

ALEX!!

YOU STUPID KID!

WAIT!

ALEX!! COME BACK!!

NO GOOD, HE'S NOT COMING BACK.

JUST PRAY HE DOESN'T TIP OUR HAND TOO SOON!

HE'S... WELL TRAINED.

HE WAS SECOND ONLY TO ME IN ALL OUR CLASSES.

HE'LL... BE ALL RIGHT.

I HOPE SO, KIRKLAND, BUT, LIKE I KEEP TELLING YOU...

...THE WAY SATHANAS PLAYS THIS GAME IS NOTHING LIKE ANYTHING YOU EVER SAW IN A TRAINING SESSION.

THAT'S WHY SATHANAS IS *MY* TARGET. GOT THAT? I DON'T WANT ANY OF THE REST OF YOU TRYING TO TAKE HIM.

I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO HAS A *CHANCE* AGAINST HIM.

NOW KEEP MOVING, KIDDIES...

"...AND HOPE WE CATCH UP TO OUR YOUNG FRIEND...

"...BEFORE *HE* CATCHES UP TO A WHOLE MESS OF TROUBLE."

BUT, BASED ON THE CONDITION OF ALEXI'S *CORPSE* WHEN WE FOUND IT...

...IT WASN'T HARD TO GUESS WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIM.

OF COURSE, WE DIDN'T ACTUALLY SEE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT.

SATHANAS IS QUICK, BUT ALEXI MIGHT HAVE HAD TIME TO SEE WHO WAS ATTACKING HIM.

MIGHT EVEN HAVE HAD TIME TO TRY A COUNTERATTACK.

NOT THAT IT WOULD HAVE DONE HIM MUCH GOOD.

NO. NOT REALLY...

...MUCH GOOD...

...AT ALL.

ATTACK, MY HALFLINGS! DESTROY THEM!

THEY STRIKE FROM A DOZEN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS.

IT SEEMS LIKE CHAOS UNLEASHED, BUT IT ISN'T.

THEY'VE BEEN PREPARING FOR THIS FOR A LONG TIME. THEY KNOW OUR METHODS, OUR TRAINING,

AND WE KNOW ALMOST NOTHING ABOUT THEM.

FOR ONE TERRIBLE MOMENT IT ALMOST SEEMS AS IF EACH OF OUR ATTACKERS HAS BEEN ***SPECIFICALLY*** PREPARED FOR EACH OF US.

THAT THE ONE WHO ATTACKS MAGGIE KNOWS JUST WHAT HER SPECIAL SKILLS ARE.

THAT EACH OF OUR INDIVIDUAL WEAKNESSES HAS BEEN DIVINED...

...AND IS NOW BEING ACTED UPON.

THE TRUTH, WHEN IT DAWNS, IS EVEN MORE FRIGHTENING.

CADET TRAINING HAS ***NOT*** PREPARED ANYONE FOR THIS KIND OF BATTLE.

ONLY ONE WHO ACTS AS SWIFTLY, AS RUTHLESSLY AS THE ATTACKERS...

...HAS ANY HOPE OF WINNING OVER THEM.

AND THAT HOPE IS A SMALL ONE.

PRESENT FOR YOU, RED.

HOPE YOU GET A BANG OUT OF IT!

CHARGE...

MOLECULAR BOND...

TANNEN...

TANNEN!!

CEASE BATTLE!

THEIR LEADER IS SLAIN!

SEIZE THE CHILDREN!

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A LONG, SLOW BLUR OF INFINITE PAIN.

HE'S FAINTED AGAIN.

TSK TSK. ARE YOU LOSING YOUR *TOUCH*, STANISLAUS? I CAN REMEMBER A TIME YOU WOULD HAVE KEPT HIM AT THRESHOLD FOR *HOURS*.

IT'S THE FIELD EFFECT OF THIS STATION. WE *THRIVE* ON IT, BUT THESE WEAK CREATURES...

SHALL I START ON THE SECOND FEMALE?

WHY?

WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?

WHAT CAN YOU POSSIBLY HOPE TO GAIN BY SABOTAGING THIS STATION?

MUCH.

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO MANKIND ISOLATED THE TRIGGER GENE. THE SINGLE GREATEST FORCE BEHIND EVOLUTION.

NOT LONG AFTER THAT A SURPRISING SIDE EFFECT WAS DISCOVERED. THOSE WHO HAD HAD THEIR TRIGGER GENES ARTIFICIALLY ACTIVATED...

...BECAME LIVING CATALYSTS, ACTIVATING THE TRIGGER GENE IN ALL THOSE WITH WHOM THEY HAD SEXUAL CONTACT.

MUTATION, ONCE A RARE AND UNLIKELY OCCURRENCE, BECAME THE MOST VIRULENT "SOCIAL DISEASE" EVER ENCOUNTERED.

A "CURE" WAS DISCOVERED, IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY...

...BUT BY THEN THE DAMAGE WAS DONE. THE TRIGGER GENE HAD GONE RECESSIVE.

IT OCCURS NOW QUITE AT RANDOM, CREATING MUTATES LIKE MY HALFLINGS.

BUT NOT ENOUGH. NOT NEARLY ENOUGH. EVOLUTION DOES NOT OCCUR QUICKLY ENOUGH TO KEEP MY RANKS SWELLING.

CATASTROPHIC STIMULUS IS NEEDED TO PROPERLY...

SATH-ANAS!

SCANNERS HAVE DETECTED A FLIGHT OF SAFEGUARD WARBIRDS CLOSING FAST THROUGH THE FOURTH SECTOR BOUNDARY.

"THEY WILL BE UPON US IN SECONDS!"

OR EVEN LESS.

THE FIRST VOLLEY STRIKES LOW AGAINST THE BLACK BULK OF THE OZONE GENERATOR.

A HUNDRED HALFLINGS DIE IN THE FIRST MICROSECONDS OF THE ATTACK.

TWICE THAT NUMBER REMAIN...

...AND MOVE SWIFTLY TO THE DEFENSE OF THEIR CAPTURED TERRITORY.

EVEN THE EXPERIENCED FIELD AGENTS ARE ILL-PREPARED FOR THE FURY OF THE ASSAULT.

AND, NOT FAR FROM THE FURY, THE CREATURE CALLED SATHANAS *FEELS* THE AGONY OF THE DYING, HALFLING AND HUMAN ALIKE...

...AND HE *LAUGHS.*

DO THEY THINK THEY CAN SO EASILY CATCH US UNAWARES?

FOOLS! PITIFUL, BENIGHTED FOOLS!

I MUST GO NOW SWIFTLY TO LEAD MY WARRIORS.

A PITY. I SENSE IN YOU A STRONG LIFE FORCE. I WOULD HAVE MUCH ENJOYED YOUR PAIN.

NOW I MUST CONTENT MYSELF...

...WITH ONLY YOUR LIFE.

MAGGIE FEELS THE YEARS DRAIN OUT OF HER, WATER GUSHING FROM A SPIGOT.

HER SCREAM IS TERRIBLE TO HEAR.

BUT NOT LONG IN DURATION...

BACK OFF, SATHANAS. IF YOU WANT A LIFE, SEE IF YOU CAN TAKE *MINE!*

TANNEN!

NO! NOT AGAIN!!

SAVE T, SATHANAS.

IF YOU HAVEN'T LEARNED BY NOW THAT I'M A LOT HARDER TO KILL THAN THAT...

...YOU NEVER WILL!

DE FUEGO! GET THE OTHERS CLEAR! I'LL HANDLE SATHANAS!

WILL YOU?

VERY WELL, TANNEN.

THIS IS THE WAY IT WAS ALWAYS MEANT TO BE

ONE WHO IS DEATH INCARNATE, AND ONE WHO CANNOT DIE.

YET BATTLING TO THE DEATH!

THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US, SATHANAS. I DON'T WANT YOU DEAD.

I WANT YOU ALIVE, SO ALL THE WORLD WILL SEE THE MENACE APOLLYON IS!

BUT I CANNOT ALLOW THAT, TANNEN.

I HAVE PROMISED MY PEOPLE I WILL NEVER ALLOW THEM TO BE RETURNED TO APOLLYON.

"TODAY WE CONQUER...

"OR WE DIE!"

...WHY ISN'T HE USING HIS DEATH GRIP ON TANNEN..?

IT DOESN'T WORK ON HIM!

THAT'S WHY TANNEN WAS SO SURE HE WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO HAD A HOPE OF DEFEATING SATHANAS!

HE'S THE ONLY ONE SATHANAS IS AFRAID OF!

"AFRAID? TOMMY... HE SURE DOESN'T ACT LIKE HE'S AFRAID!"

NO MORE FALSE BRAVADO, TANNEN!

WE ARE PHYSICALLY EQUAL!

DO YOU DARE FIGHT ME WITHOUT YOUR WEAPONS?

IS THIS A GOOD ENOUGH AN- ER, SATHANAS?

IF IT'S MANO A MANO YOU WANT...

...I'M HAPPY ENOUGH TO LET YOU HAVE IT.

VERY WELL.

TIME TO REWRITE THE RULES AGAIN!

YOU'LL NEVER LEARN, WILL YOU, TANNEN?

I KNOW ABOUT YOUR LITTLE SPEECHES. HOW YOU ALWAYS WARN PEOPLE NOT TO EXPECT A HALFLING TO PLAY BY THE RULES.

BUT IN THE END, YOU CAN'T HELP YOURSELF, CAN YOU? YOU HAVE TO GIVE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT.

MAYBE... YOU'RE RIGHT, SATHANAS.

BUT I'M LEARNING..

A PITY FOR YOU THAT IT WILL BE THE LAST LESSON YOU EVER...

AH-GH!!

OKAY, SATHANAS, THAT'S ENOUGH. TANNEN MAY HAVE AGREED NOT TO USE HIS WEAPONS, BUT I DIDN'T.

NOW, STAND CLEAR.

OR THE NEXT SHOT GOES THROUGH YOUR HEART.

IF I HAD ONE, BOY.

BUT YOU WILL NEVER HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO FIND OUT!

A TRAP DOOR!

THAT SHAFT GOES DOWN FIVE HUNDRED FEET AT LEAST!

HE■ DELIBERATELY JUMPED TO HIS DEATH, RATHER THAN LET US CAPTURE HIM!

DON'T COUNT ON IT, KID.

SATHANAS WOULD NEVER HAVE CAPTURED THIS STATION IF HE HADN'T MEMORIZED EVERY INCH OF IT FIRST.

THAT SHAFT MUST LEAD TO AN ESCAPE ROUTE.

AND WE'VE GOT TO FOLLOW HIM DOWN IT.

IT'S A LONG WAY DOWN.

TANNEN, ARE YOU SURE YOU CAN MAKE IT?

DON'T WORRY ABOUT ME.

STAY ON ALERT.

SATHANAS COULD BE WAITING FOR US.

HIDING BEHIND ANY CORNER.

STAY...

...ALERT...

TANNEN!

TANNEN! YOU ARE HURT! YOU'RE BLEEDING ALL OVER THE PLACE.

DIDN'T... WANT THE... WOMEN TO... SEE.

COULDN'T... RISK THEM TELLING OTHERS... OTHER AGENTS, OR... HALFLINGS.

LISTEN TO ME. ONLY... GOT A LITTLE TIME.

ONE CHANCE TO STOP SATHANAS.

DON'T WASTE YOUR ENERGY TALKING, TANNEN.

YOUR SHIP IS EQUIPPED WITH A LIFE SUPPORT UNIT, JUST LIKE ALL THE SAFEGUARD CRAFT, RIGHT?

THERE'S STILL TIME FOR ME TO GET YOU TO...

NO. I'M DONE. MY GAG WAS ALWAYS HEALING... HEALING FAST.

THAT'S WHY IT TOOK SATHANAS THREE DAYS TO WRECK MY FACE. BUT IT'S NOT GOING TO WORK, THIS TIME.

BUT THERE'S STILL A CHANCE TO STOP SATHANAS, AS LONG AS HE'S AFRAID OF ME.

USE THAT FEAR, KID.

USE THAT FEAR... AND THE PROMISE HE MADE TO THE OTHER HALFLINGS.

USE...

...TANNEN..?

HE'S DEAD!

AND I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT HE WAS TRYING TO SAY!

MAYBE, IF I CAN GET HIM TO THE SHIP, MAYBE THERE'S STILL TIME FOR THE LIFE SUPPORT UNIT...

WHAT THE..?

I WOULDN'T WASTE MY TIME WORRYING ABOUT SAVING CORPSES, KID.

SATHANAS KNEW SOMEBODY MIGHT COME AFTER HIM.

AND HE LEFT ME TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GET ANY FURTHER.

WRONG, FREAK.

ONCE UPON A TIME I MIGHT HAVE TRIED TO TAKE YOU DOWN EASY,

BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THAT ANYMORE!

MY FIRST KILL.

I'D ALWAYS THOUGHT, IF IT CAME TO IT, IF I HAD TO KILL SOMEBODY IN THE LINE OF DUTY...

...IT WOULD BE IN THE HEAT OF BATTLE, KILL OR BE KILLED.

I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE ABLE TO DO IT IN COLD BLOOD.

AND I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE ABLE TO DO IT WITHOUT *FEELING* ANYTHING.

LOOKS LIKE TANNEN TRAINED ME WELL, EVEN IF HE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO DO IT IN.

OUTSIDE, THE BATTLE RAGES. FROM WHERE I STAND IT'S HARD TO TELL WHO'S WINNING.

AT LEAST EVERYONE'S TOO BUSY TO SEE WHAT I DO NEXT.

TANNEN BRIEFED ME ON THE REMOTE SIGNAL FOR HIS FLYER. SIMPLE ENOUGH FOR A THREE-YEAR-OLD, IF HE KNEW HOW.

I CALL THE WAR WAGON, CUE THE AUTO-DEFENSE SYSTEMS TO PROTECT IT ON ITS FLIGHT TO MY LOCATION.

I SEE IT RISE UP OVER A BANK OF ICE, SLICING THROUGH THE HALFLINGS LIKE THEY WEREN'T EVEN THERE.

I BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHY TANNEN WAS SO PROUD OF HIS CRATE.

WITH NO ONE AT THE HELM IT CUTS THROUGH THE BATTLEFIELD LIKE AN EXPERT PILOT WAS FLYING IT.

EXPLOSIONS GO OFF ALL AROUND, BUT I DON'T SEE IT SO MUCH AS WOBBLE.

IT REACHES MY POSITION WITHOUT A SCRATCH ADDED TO ITS BATTERED OLD SHELL.

I START OUT ACROSS OPEN GROUND TOWARD IT.

THE ANCIENT SNOW IS SO COLD IT DRIVES A STEEL SPIKE RIGHT UP MY SPINE.

I REALIZE THEN THAT THE MAIN PART OF THE STATION IS TEMPERATURE-SHIELDED.

BUT THE SECOND I STEP OFF THE PLATFORM, I'M OUTSIDE THE SHIELD EFFECT.

IT'S ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY DEGREES BELOW ZERO, ON THE OLD FAHRENHEIT SCALE.

I CAN ALMOST FEEL MY SKIN HARDEN.

THE SHIP SEEMS TO SENSE WHAT'S HAPPENING. THE LIFE SUPPORT UNIT DEPLOYS.

BY THE TIME I REACH IT I'M SHIVERING SO BADLY I CAN BARELY SEE TO GET TANNEN'S BODY IN PLACE.

THE READOUTS CONFIRM MY WORST GUESS. TANNEN IS BEYOND ANYTHING THESE MACHINES CAN DO.

AND I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT. I STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT HE WANTED ME TO DO.

AND THEN THE PENNY DROPS.

IT SEEMS SO OBVIOUS I WONDER HOW I COULD HAVE MISSED IT.

I ALSO WONDER IF IT HAS A HOPE IN HELL OF WORKING.

MEANWHILE...

TANNEN GAVE NO SPECIFIC ORDERS TO MAGGIE AND LIZ. SO THEY'VE DONE WHAT ANY GOOD FIELD AGENTS WOULD DO.

THEY'VE MADE THEIR WAY THROUGH THE STATION TO THE BATTLEFIELD.

THEY ARRIVE JUST IN TIME FOR SATHANAS'S LAST STAND.

ALTHOUGH SATHANAS DOESN'T KNOW THAT YET.

FORM ON ME, MY HALFLINGS!

TODAY I HAVE SEEN THE END OF MY GREATEST FOE! TODAY OUR FINAL VICTORY BEGINS!

I WOULDN'T COUNT ON THAT, SATHANAS.

THE VOICE MODULATOR WORKS PERFECTLY. I SOUND JUST LIKE TANNEN.

AND AS THE SYSTEMS IN THE SUIT WORK THEIR SECRET MAGIC, I BEGIN TO ***FEEL*** JUST LIKE TANNEN.

I'VE TOLD YOU, SATHANAS. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO WORK A LOT HARDER TO KILL ME.

I SEE THE PANIC RUN THROUGH THE HALFLINGS. SATHANAS WAS SURE TANNEN WAS DEAD.

HE TOLD THEM TANNEN WAS DEAD.

AND NOW THEY'VE GOT TO WONDER WHY HE ***LIED*** TO THEM.

DON'T BREAK RANKS!

THIS IS SOME KIND OF TRICK!

HE COULD NOT HAVE SURVIVED THE JOLT I GAVE HIM!

I WONDER HOW TO PLAY THE NEXT HAND. WHAT TO SAY, WHAT TO DO TO FINISH THE GAME.

TO CONVINCE THE HALFLINGS THEIR MASTER HAS ***BETRAYED*** THEM.

FOR A MOMENT I'D ACTUALLY FORGOTTEN THE WHOLE SHOW WOULD BE SEEN BY THE OTHER SAFEGUARD AGENTS.

AND THEY WOULDN'T WASTE TIME WORRYING ABOUT WHO WAS REALLY ALIVE, OR WHY, OR HOW.

THEY'D JUST ACT.

A SCORE OF RESTRAINING RODS THUNK INTO THE SNOW LIKE ARROWS FROM A GIANT BOW.

BEFORE THE HALFLINGS HAVE THE CHANCE TO REACT, THE LOCK FIELDS GO UP...

...AND THE SURVIVING ESCAPEES ARE SURROUNDED BY A HEMISPHERE OF INVISIBLE, IMPENETRABLE ENERGY.

BUT THE DAY'S NOT DONE YET.

COME CLOSER, AGENT!

LET ME SEE IF YOU REALLY WEAR THE SCARS I PUT ON TANNEN'S FACE!

SORRY, SATHANAS. I'VE LEARNED MY LESSON, REMEMBER?

I DON'T HAVE TO PLAY FAIR ANYMORE. I DON'T HAVE TO GIVE YOU ANY KIND OF FAIR CHANCE.

NICE GOING, BOYS. CALL IN THE HAULERS, AND WE'LL SHIP THESE FREAKS BACK TO THEIR ROCK...

...AFTER WE CLEAN IT UP FOR THEM, OF COURSE. LEFT A FEW OF YOUR OWN IN CHARGE OF APOLLYON, RIGHT, SATHANAS?

A FEW, AND I'M SURE THEY'LL SURRENDER.

I ORDERED THEM TO SURRENDER, IN FACT, IF WE DID NOT COME BACK FOR THEM.

AND WE WILL NOT BE COMING BACK, I PROMISED MY HALFLINGS...

...PROMISED I WOULD NEVER LET THEM BE RETURNED TO APOLLYON.

THE CONTAINMENT FIELD HOLDS IN THE FULL FORCE OF THE BLAST.

BUT WHEN I THROW MY ARM ACROSS MY EYES, THERE'S ONE GUT-WRENCHING MOMENT WHEN I SEE MY BONES THROUGH THE RED VEIL OF MY FLESH.

LATER.

THE CONTAINMENT RODS HAVE BEEN REMOVED. NOTHING FOR THEM TO CONTAIN.

NOTHING AT ALL.

YOU'D THINK THERE'D BE SOME TRACE OF BIOLOGICAL MATERIAL, EVEN AFTER A BLAST THAT INTENSE.

BUT THERE'S NOTHING. NOTHING AT ALL.

SOMEHOW THIS DOES NOT COME AS A SURPRISE. SATHANAS DID NOTHING WITHOUT COVERING THE CONTINGENCIES, THIS MUCH I'VE LEARNED.

I DON'T THINK IT'S OVER YET.

CERTAINLY, THERE'S ONE MORE ACT TO PLAY IN THIS PERFORMANCE. MAYBE THE HARDEST ACT.

MAGGIE HASN'T TAKEN HER EYES OFF ME FOR MORE THAN TWO SECONDS SINCE I CAME OUT.

EVEN WHEN I'M NOT LOOKING AT HER, I CAN FEEL HER LOOKING AT ME. MEASURING ME, GAUGING.

UNTIL SHE'S READY TO SAY SOMETHING.

YOU SEEM A LITTLE *SHRUNKEN*, AGENT RED. FUNNY, I WAS SURE YOU WERE QUITE A BIT TALLER THAN ME. QUITE A BIT TALLER THAN THOMAS, TOO.

NOW, YOU SEEM ABOUT THE SAME HEIGHT.

AND WHAT I CAN SEE OF YOUR FACE DOESN'T LOOK QUITE SO MESSED UP.

I THINK YOU MAY BE LETTING YOUR IMAGINATION GET THE BETTER OF YOU, MISS DE FUEGO. I'M TANNEN.

TANNEN IS THE ONLY ONE SATHANAS IS AFRAID OF. TANNEN IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN KEEP SATHANAS OFF HIS GUARD.

SO THERE HAS TO BE A TANNEN.

AS LONG AS THERE'S ANY CHANCE SATHANAS SURVIVED,

IT WASN'T TANNEN WHO DIED HERE TODAY.

IT WAS THOMAS KIRKLAND.

EVERYTHING HAS A BEGINNING, BUT FEW THINGS REALLY HAVE ENDINGS.

FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT, THOUGH, WE CAN END IT HERE. THREE DAYS LATER.

SAFEGUARD CONTROL HAS FINALLY ALLOWED MAGGIE AND ELIZABETH TO VISIT BARBARA KIRKLAND. TO TELL HER WHAT HAPPENED TO HER SON.

TO TELL HER HE DIED A HERO.

TANNEN HAD A LOT OF TRICKS NO ONE IN SAFEGUARD EVER SUSPECTED.

THE DEVICE I HOLD LETS ME SEE THROUGH THE WALLS OF MY OLD HOUSE LIKE THEY WERE GLASS.

HEAR EVERYTHING BEING SAID LIKE I WAS IN THE SAME ROOM.

I'M SORRY I CAN'T TELL YOU ANYTHING MORE, MRS. KIRKLAND.

I... KNOW, MAGGIE. I UNDERSTAND.

I... GUESS IT'S THE WAY THOMAS WOULD HAVE WANTED IT. HE WAS SO PROUD TO BE IN SAFEGUARD.

SO VERY PROUD.

I TURN OFF THE SOUND, KILL THE VIDEO. IT'S GOING TO BE HARD ENOUGH, WITHOUT CARRYING THOSE IMAGES WITH ME.

I'VE LEARNED A LOT ABOUT TANNEN IN THE LAST FEW DAYS. A LOT FROM HIS PERSONAL LOG, ON HIS SHIP. MY SHIP NOW.

TANNEN WAS AN ILLUSION, A PROP, MANUFACTURED BY HIMSELF, WITH A SPECIFIC PURPOSE IN MIND.

HE STARTED BUILDING THAT PROP THE DAY HE DISCOVERED HIS IMMUNITY TO SATHANAS'S DEATH GRIP. THE DAY HE DISCOVERED HE WAS, HIMSELF, A HALFLING.

I WALK AWAY FROM MY OLD LIFE, AND I WONDER FOR A MOMENT WHAT LIES AHEAD.

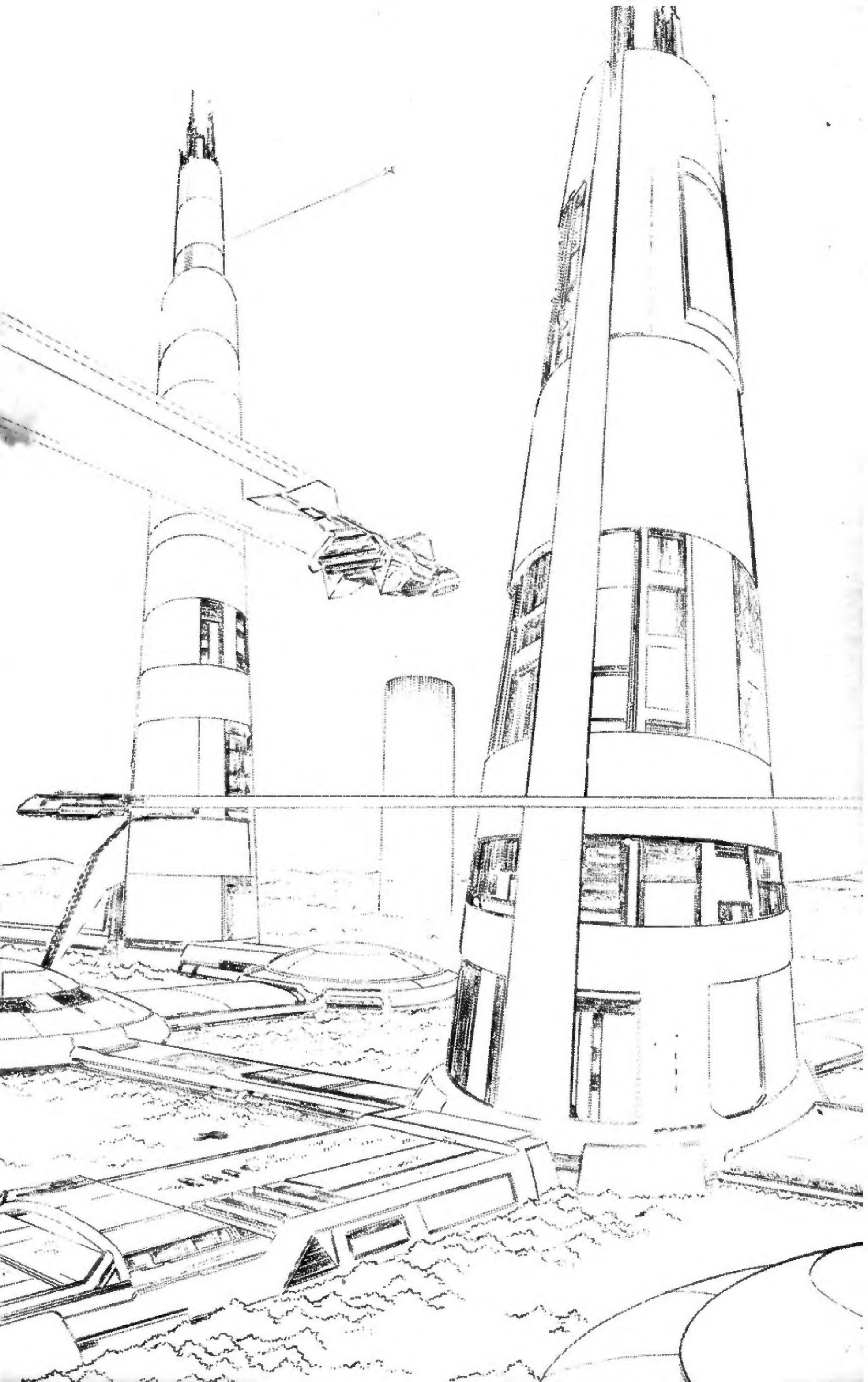
I WONDER IF THERE IS ANY WAY, EVEN THE MOST OUTLANDISH, THE MOST UNIMAGINABLE WAY, THAT ALL THIS MIGHT BE UNDONE.

THAT THE CURSE OF THE HALFLINGS MIGHT BE LIFTED FROM THE HUMAN RACE.

AND I KNOW, SOMEHOW, THAT IT IS MORE THAN A MERE CLICHÉ WHEN I THINK TO MYSELF...

...ONLY *TIME* WILL TELL.

ONLY *TIME* WILL TELL.



In a shining future, mankind enjoys the benefits of advanced technology, with only Sathanas and his mutate rebellion marring the perfection of life. Or so it seems. When a young law enforcement agent begins digging beneath the surface of the story, he finds the horrible secrets that lie behind the persecution of the mutates, secrets that could destroy the fragile world of... 2112.